CHAPTER 120: ELIOR FOREST, GLACIATED EVERMORE

—The site has already changed so drastically that you could forget what it originally looked like.

Destruction like a rampage of giant, frenzied serpents. All trees felled down to nothing, some severed from their roots and dancing violently through the air.
Several craters, too deep to sight the bottom, lie gouged open on the fractured earth, the ruin so exhaustive that the entire region could imminently cave in and transform into a pit to hell.

All of this destruction is the work of one man, standing in the dead centre of the devastation.
Blood spills fresh from his face, his breath faltering while he nevertheless manages to keep himself upright. He has taken SIN unfitting to him inside him, his life whittled away in exchange for power, this desecrater.
He is Juice—Betelgeux Romanee-Conti.

Juice: “—”

He breathes ragged, his face so lost of colour that it has transcended the word 'pallid'.
But even so, he has regained more calm than what he had at the beginning of the conflict. It seems like the raging SOMETHING has, for the moment, accepted the uncomfortable environment as its temporary lodgings.

His bones and flesh have already been ravaged from inside, but control of the body is now entirely entrusted to Juice, the power acting as equivalent for rent having increased in strength and accuracy.

Wielding this authority, overwhelming destructive power.
Unseen Hand's strength is immense, allowing him to extend his arms to places he cannot touch, let his fingertips contact what he cannot contact, sending power crashing into someone he should have no hopes of opposing.
Juice's power, leader of the Witch Cult's moderate faction as he is, will never match that of the extremists what with their militaristic bent. And that goes double when discussing the person who possesses the greatest ability for combat in the cult, Cardinal of GREED Regulus Corneas.

That Juice is managing to somehow face Regulus without instantly being turned into gory paste is unmistakably the achievement of the witch factor he subsumed.

But, Juice's frantic resistance has,

Juice: “How do... you, FIND, THIS...”

Glaring ahead with his bloodshot eyes, Juice strangles out his voice as he holds his trembling arms aloft.
Unseen Hand's unrelenting, uninterrupted storm of concentrated violence. Having been endlessly battered around by the thing, the enemy vanishes beneath the dense plumes of dust,

Regulus: “Oh, you're done?”

When the smoke resides, it reveals Regulus merely standing there, looking bored with his finger in his ear.
His figure as he stands there rigorously probing his ear could conceivably be detached from the environment from how absolutely none of the assault has affected him. As if he had been pasted onto the scene of the annihilation in post-production.

Juice: “Even with... all of this!”

Regulus: “How about toning it down and taking a moment to realise? To realise the discrepancy. To realise that between you and me, there is a clear power discrepancy. And you can disregard however good your compatibility against me could hypothetically get, because that isn't even the issue here. There's nobody out there who can beat me, or can wound me. You can go ahead and subsume a witch factor, and then go ahead and bring the Dragon and Sword Saint along with you, it's still not going to work.”

Juice: “...Perhaps you may, say so... although it rather appears that I have... purchased from you, CONSIDERABLE TIME.”

Regulus: “Because there's no need for me to get into a panic to overtake you. Aren't your eyes telling you? I'm just here as a chaperone. Do you think I'd go out of my way to come to this kind of place if I wasn't? Being in my mansion surrounded by my wives is enough to glut me for the minuscule fraction of peace I desire. But, well, I have to say I'm starting to get bored.”

Regulus slowly steps forward.
He walks calmly through the transmogrified forest, descending from his position until his eye level matches that of Juice, and easily gives a swish of his arm.

It's like he's swatting an insect. Juice braces for anything to happen.
Calling within himself, he sacrifices his flesh and blood to the dark, squirming thing to gain power. He takes in a breath, ready to use the push welling up from inside him to batter Regulus around,

When Juice's arms go flying through the air, severed at the shoulders.

Juice: “Wh!?”

Regulus: “What a dull reaction. With how you've been annoying me, don't you think it's simple courtesy to at least writhe in a form of agony that's fun to watch? Though I suppose there was no point expecting anything.”

Juice: “aaaaaaAAAAAAAAAHHH!!”

With his arms splaying blood about the surroundings as they tumble across the ground, the eyes of the disarmed Juice shoot open wide as he shrieks.
The cut at his shoulders is sloppy, leaving an ugly wound as if a beast's fangs have mangled his arms off. His right arm is gone from the shoulder down, his left arm severed about halfway down his humerus.

Juice convulses in gruesome pain.
Bloody froth spills from his mouth, the excess of pain leading him to grit his teeth so hard that he breaks tooth after tooth after tooth. His legs, already lacking in strength at the best of times, falter and drop him down to his knees. His forehead hits the ground, despair creeping over Juice's expression.

Regulus: “In the end, your resolve or your determination or your whatever and so on and all those other things I suppose we're going to talk about, well here you see what they amount to. And it's the same for everyone, so don't bother worrying about it. There's nobody out there who can live while carrying more than their arms' capacity. Live while satisfied in your own little world, fulfilled,

focused only on your own concerns. According to what's fitting for your calibre. And you don't even have arms to hold anything now... the conclusion here is obvious, don't you think?”

Juice: “AAAH! AAAAAAahhh...”

Regulus: “And being entirely honest, it's not like I'm enjoying this. You might see me tormenting you like this and perhaps think that I'm some kind of sadist who feels pleasure when inflicting pain on others, but actually that would be an incredible misapprehension, and a great insult to the personality what I possess. I'm not doing this because I want to do it. There's nothing in my life any more that I do because I want to do it. Fulfilled as I am, regardless of whether the nuance is a good one or a bad one, my preference is to reject the influence of anyone else. I am without want. I am fully fulfilled. You don't have any right in the slightest to resent me. I was simply walking along, and you were simply in my path.”

The spouts of blood dampen in their velocity, Juice's screams transforming into something loud to something quiet.
With the quiet, ragged puffs of his breathing, Juice's form as he expels bloody foam spasms like an insect seconds away from demise.

Regulus's words carry no malice, or hostility, or anything at all.
Because as far as he cared he was stating the absolute truth, and no reason existed to pair it with any emotion of any form. Regulus had no need to hide anything, and so truly believed this.
Juice's desperate deeds had influenced Regulus Corneas so little that his bangs did not even sway in the resultant breeze.

Regulus: “Speaking in full sincerity, this was all very anticlimactic. I was being called along which had me thinking that something would happen, and... well, not that there's ever been a situation which hasn't resulted in an anticlimax for me, but if I'm getting summoned I'd at least like for you to show me something that can hope to counterbalance to the effort I put into walking around.”

Pandora: “I give my apology, Cardinal Regulus. I have put you through the pains to accompany me, and the trip has failed to meet to your expectations.”

Pandora addresses Regulus as he looks down at the nigh-withered Juice.
She had also remained through all of Juice's onslaught with Unseen Hand while remaining standing stock still in the very same spot that she had first appeared.
Just like Regulus, her outfit has not changed an inch. Not a speck of dirt pollutes the white cloth enshrouding her small, thin frame, the purity of the garment preserved, and her beautiful face suffers not a single wound.

Regulus: “I do not mean to say that you are at fault, Pandora-sama. I'm just saying that all these forest people and the idiots in the moderates are unanimously pathetic. Trash without even the slightest intention to improve themselves. They're not like me, sitting at heights where the very concept of improvement carries no necessity, they have these attitudes while being mundane rabble whose lives are over if they ever stop struggling. They're rejecting the idea of meeting their own capacity, and from my perspective as GREED I have to say that level of desire is inconceivably shallow.”

Pandora: “It is not the case that every person in existence can consider matters in the same way that you do, or reach the same domains that you have. You are more special than anybody else, and satisfied in that self of yours. You are perfected and glorious. While they are imperfect and also glorious.”

Regulus: “I'm not the most favourable when it comes to arguing theories. I have no compunctions against receiving your praise, but I cannot say that I'm seeking commendation either. Though, there was no need to bring myself and the Blacksnake alongside, was there? You could easily dominate this forest on your own, Pandora-sama.”

Somewhere right now in this forest, there exists the pestilent witchbeast.
The presence of the repugnant and malicious thing prompts Regulus's disgust, all without him realising that from anyone else's perspective, he would deserve to be thought of in the same manner.
Pandora nods.

Pandora: “If we are considering in terms of overturning their resistance, then it would indeed be possible for me to achieve it by myself. However, those are not the terms in consideration. As I assuredly did not come here for the purpose of harming the inhabitants of this forest.”

Regulus: “This is what you're saying after bringing the indiscriminate Blacksnake here and leaving it to its devices? I'm sure that you're being entirely genuine about not meaning to cause harm... so have you then rationalized that fatalities are simply unavoidable?”

Pandora: “When pursuing a noble goal, it is essential that some lives be given as sacrifices. But even so, one cannot disremember the zeal to rebel against even that wicked fate. I believe that the beauty of such spirit cannot be invalidated.”

Regulus: “You're diverging from the point, but essentially you're talking about killing people to achieve your goals. Ahahaha. If that's all we're discussing, then I'd call it preferential to state it plainly and clearly. Compared to making me waste a day of my time racking my brain pointlessly, far more preferential.”

Pandora: “I feel very fondly about your approach.”

Pandora gives an enchanting smile. Regulus shrugs.
Regulus lowers his gaze back to Juice, who will probably die if left alone, and begins walking over to deliver the finishing blow.

Regulus: “Well it's not like I think you'll die from that body dying, but pulling your insides out and keeping you trammelled does make our operations easier. Though it's pretty strange to be talking about trammelling someone who doesn't have a body.”[2]

Regulus raises his leg, ready to stomp down and smash Juice's skull to bits. But right before he can make contact, a voice cuts into the scene.

???: “AL HUMA!!”

Obeying the canto, matter takes in the world's mana to achieve form.
Appearing alongside the explosive noise is a ball of ice so giant that it encompasses all of the visible sky above. The trees are felled and the sky's panoramic is easily observable, but the only thing to observe is a vast sheet of pale blue ice.

Regulus: “Ahh... I swear, nobody can give it a break.”

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2 Doesn't have a body → more accurately, doesn't have a head or neck. I'm 99% sure this futzing doesn't matter at all (the 1% is the chance that Juice is the mysterious kind of spirit that has pinkies or something) but hey.

Looking up and spotting the continent of ice floating above him, Regulus clicks his tongue.
Immediately, the immense ball of ice plunged down from directly above him—

—The earthquake, and the unavoidable shockwave, batter Regulus entirely.

This explosion of air and rumbling of earth exacerbates even further the collapse of this forest only describable as a 'disaster zone'.
The sheet of ice shatters into fragments, with the crushed trees and boulders, the ground pulverised under this incredible mass, changing shape once again within only this one single day.

Shard of white ice dance through the air, scintillating.
Among their gleam is a man toppled limply on his side, with a silver-haired woman dragging him.

Woman: “Juice! Juice, keep steady! This is... what am I meant to...”

Juice: “Fohr, tuna, sama... is that, YOU?”

A weak light returns to Juice's nigh-dead eyes.
His life still remains equally in danger, but he still manages to barely remain conscious. Fortuna nods

Fortuna: “Yes, yes, it's me. Juice, you're...”

Juice: “I am, FINE... this flesh is, due to wither someday... The finger who trusted me, and entrusted it to me, will understand... of more concern is, Emilia?”

Fortuna: “I left her with someone trustworthy and they fled the forest. She's fine.”

Juice: “I, see... I am, glad to HEAR SO...”

???: “—Except there's nothing to be glad about at all!!”

Just when Juice's blood-slaked face relaxes in relief, the voice of an enraged Regulus shouts over him.
Having been stricken by a massive sheet of ice, Regulus's expression is furious. He combs his hand through his bangs, his eyes hosting clear animosity.

Regulus: “The very second you come back, and just who do you think you are to pull this stunt? I was seconds away from stomping that guy's head in, me, I was! With what right, with whose permission, are you taking my... my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my mymymymymymymymymymymymy!! Getting in!! My way!!”

Screaming as if in tantrum, Regulus squats down and puts his hands to the ground. He proceeds to swing his arms up, casting up dirt to dance through the air, the soft soil flying toward Fortuna and Juice.
The quantity of scattered dirt is not especially much. It's the kind of thing a child would do, throwing sand about a sandbox, the embodiment of crude and infantile anger.

Sighting the dirt, Fortuna ignores the stuff as she immediately focuses her magic for a counterattack.
But,

Juice: “You mustn't! If you neglect... to evade, all the earth...”

Fortuna: “Huh?”

Interrupting Fortuna's canto, Juice headbutts her to the ground. The two tumble across the earth undefended, when Juice frantically strains himself to use UNSEEN HAND and throw the couple further backwards.

Rather than intercept or defend against the dirt, he opted that they tumble messily across the ground. Just when Fortuna verges on yelling to question what the hell Juice is doing, she sees it.

The moment that the dirt and pebbles that Regulus threw hit the ground, out peals the staccato noise of raindrops beating on a rooftop as COUNTLESS TINY HOLES BORE THROUGH THE EARTH.
Each hole is only the size of a grain of sand, but the density and piercing property of them present an issue.

The mystery attack had by and large concluded by only gouging open the earth, but one fragment of the assault did manage to hit a tree which still precariously retained its original shape.
This tree, with a trunk so thick that it was questionable whether Fortuna could loop her arms around it, ripped open with countless tiny holes and burst into smithereens.

It's easy to envision that hitting someone, and them instantly exploding into bloodspatter.
And the most terrifying thing is,

Regulus: “Why the hell are you people dodging! Just take the attack, turn into gore, and go be food for the bugs! That goes for you, Betelgeux, you pile of scum, and for that woman too. I was thinking you might be okay to take as my 79th wife, and then you go and pull this rubbish!”

Regulus bends down, arms to the ground as before.
The most terrifying thing is, a deed of destruction on this calibre just meant throwing dirt around for Regulus—and took no greater effort than that, child's play.

The enraged and belligerent Regulus had taken a direct hit from Fortuna's strenuous attack, for nothing to happen to him. Aberrant, is the word to describe it.
Regulus Corneas possesses transcendental powers in attack and defence. And that incredible power is locked up in a body which hosts an egotistical, infantile mind.
A dangerous entity, as if power identical to the Dragon were given to a petulant child—such is how Fortuna judges this monster.

Regulus: “If you're not keen for being gore chunks, how about I pluck off your limbs and arrange them as decoration! I'll make you regret having made a fool of me... of GREED!”

Pandora: “Please wait, Cardinal Regulus.”

Just as Regulus prepares to once again shower Juice and Fortuna in dirt, Pandora calls him to a stop. With his hands still touching the ground, Regulus turns his head to look at Pandora. The rage remains thick in his expression, and even when facing Pandora, who he had treated respectfully, he shows no signs of discarding his anger.

Regulus: “...What, Pandora-sama? Right now, I am midway through shaking in uttermost rage as my rights are being violated. You have some task for me, when I'm like this? What are you

conniving, trying to stop me? Take careful mind of your words, and, this instant, you answer me...”

Pandora: “Please settle your anger, Cardinal Regulus. I do not permit you to kill them here. Is there nothing that you feel in seeing them?”

Regulus: “In seeing me right now, do you think I look like there's nothing I feel? —I go prostrating myself and for this, don't get fucking carried away, you woman!”

Seemingly forgetting that they are allies, Regulus swings up his arm with his target being Pandora. Up launches the spray of dirt, cutting straight through and decimating the trees in its path to strike her. It hits, her body exploding into a splatter of blood and gore.

Fortuna: “...No way.”

Fortuna mutters in astonishment as she witnesses Pandora's evisceration. Someone she had loathed, killed ruthlessly due to a breakup of internal relations.
Fortuna had utterly believed that Pandora would have some ace to disregard even Regulus's attacks, but here she is strewn in scarlet chunks across the grown, fertilizer for the ruined earth.

Regulus: “This is what happens when you prattle bullshit at me. How come nobody can practice any basic goddamn form of consideration? Don't get in my way. Don't obstruct my path. Don't interfere with my actions. Don't rebel against what I do. Am I really asking for anything so difficult? Say, what are your thoughts on this?”

Regulus turns to Juice and Fortuna, a shadowy gleam in his eye.
This was not the time to celebrate about a drop in enemies. If after a drop in enemies, the enemy remaining is a person of absolute strength, then the situation hasn't changed at all.

Fortuna had used the greatest power in her disposal to hit Regulus with that surprise attack.
And even after being hit with it, Regulus's body suffers no wounds and his clothes don't even suffer a wrinkle. It's frustrating to admit, but Fortuna cannot defeat Regulus.
Juice has also been so cornered that his body has broken down. Even if Fortuna asks him to do the impossible and fight on his deathbed, the combat is going to be one-sided.

All Fortuna can do is have them lure Regulus's fury, and buy time for her daughter to run.

Juice: “Let me, deal with this... Fortuna-sama.”

Fortuna: “But Juice, you...”

Juice: “No matter how... much blood I shed, until all of my bodies are deceased, I can... KEEP, GOING. I-I, shall amass time, for you... to, flee...”

Fortuna: “Don't say these ridiculous things.”

Fortuna's cheeks relax as Juice attempts to upright himself in her arms.
It mystifies her that she can craft a smile at a time like this. She'd rather like to brag.

Fortuna: “You're telling me to leave you here and run? If I was going to do that, I wouldn't have come back here. I parted with Emilia to come back here, telling me to leave now is impossible.”

Juice: “HOW, EVER... then, if so, why... have, you returned? I-I...”

Fortuna: “To keep you from dying. And if you do die, for me to be at your side.”

With Fortuna's amethyst eyes gazing on, Juice's bloody eyes wrench open.
Considerably lighter now that he has lost his arms, Fortuna draws Juice's body closer, to tell him from within breathing range:

Fortuna: “In a world without you, in a forest you no longer visit, what is there for me? I'm weak. I can't survive a long period of time without you there.”

Juice: “You are not weak in the...”

Fortuna: “I'm weak. I act strong when I'm around you and Emilia, that's all.”

With that, Fortuna helps Juice up.
Fortuna props the trembling Juice up so that he stands, her body close against his as she supports him.
Seeing the couple standing in what could almost be an embrace, Regulus's face turns abjectly disgusted.

Regulus: “Look at how fired up you are after such a protracted period of ignoring my question. What on earth could be going on? What on earth could this be? After I showed you how incredible the power gap between us is, after I taught you in such succinct and plain terms, how can you possibly figure that you can do anything? What on earth are you people thinking?”

Fortuna: “Windbag of a man. After how our attitudes have demonstrated it, surely you can tell? Thanks for all the lectures, but we've got only one response.”

Juice: “IN, DEED.”

Fortuna and Juice share a glance, and speaking together:

Both: “—Like we care, idiot.”

Their voices overlap, with Fortuna flipping Regulus the bird as a bonus.
With that, Fortuna and Juice scramble up whatever inner power they have available.
Regulus's face flashes crimson in fury.

Regulus: “...!! Very well! I'll take the two of you, butcher you into indistinguishable chunks, hurl you into the Blacksnake's dingy maw—”

???: “What I told you was to wait, Cardinal Regulus.”

For the third time, an interruption to Regulus's plans.
Pandora's arm descends from above to press Regulus's head down, his body proceeding to sink into the earth without any resistance. Buried chin-deep into the earth under a second, Regulus glares up at Pandora as she lands beside him.

Regulus: “Just incessantly!”

Pandora: “Should it be necessary that I stymie your will, I shall. As of now, my goals in having brought you here have been by and large accomplished. You have done far enough and I would

appreciate you go home.”

Regulus: “You drag someone along, but the second you're satisfied you demand they leave? Do you think anybody could agree with these ideas of yours? Until I've settled this irritation of mine and returned to being my usual self, I will assuredly never—”

Pandora: “I see. Then I will do it. CARDINAL REGULUS COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE HERE. HE IS IN HIS MANSION, SPENDING HIS TIME WITH HIS WIVES.”

Regulus: “Wa—”

The next instant, just as Regulus goes to shout something, he snaps out of view.
It isn't that he's sunken entirely into the dirt. He has truly blinked, vanished out of this scene. In the spot where he once was, the hole from him being plunged into the dirt is gone.
As if affirming Pandora's statement, that HE COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE HERE.

Pandora: “Being that the racket has left the scene, we can now discuss at a more leisurely pace.”

Fortuna: “...Can I ask you something first? How come you're here? I know just saw you die a minute ago.”

Pandora stands there as if this is entirely natural.
This girl, calm smile on her face, is supposed to be a scattering of gore. Fortuna glances over to where her remains were strewn, and gulps.
Not a trace of the gory mess remains in the slightest. Just like how Regulus has disappeared, her corpse is vanished.

Fortuna is utterly lost for words. Pandora tilts her head.

Pandora: “Could YOUR EYES HAVE DECEIVED YOU?”[3]

Fortuna: “—!”

Fortuna shudders.
This should not be possible. But the world has reformed itself into a shape which supports Pandora's words. Invalidating what Fortuna had supposedly seen, and overwriting it all with something strange and unknown.

The corpse is gone, Pandora is resurrected. Regulus is gone, the aftermath of his deeds are gone. Immediately after realising this, Fortuna looks aside and nearly screams at the shocking thing that has happened.

Juice's arms, as he stands beside her, Juice's severed arms, are back to normal.

Pandora: “Since Cardinal Regulus is not here, the consequences of his actions have disappeared. It is all very simple. Although, the mending of Cardinal Betelgeux's arms is a result of my beneficence.”

Juice rotates his recovered arms in conformation. Fortuna's eyes waver as she watches on.

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3 The trick behind Pandora's powers and how they work has yet to be explained. This is how the line clicked in my head, but it's questionable whether my phrasing gives any legitimate suggestion as to what her power is doing.

Fortuna: “Juice, your arms...”

Juice: “They feel to move WITHOUT ISSUE. My body, also... the insides excepted, without issue.”

Pandora: “I have not rewritten so far as to change your ingestion of the factor. I would like to commend this action of yours, and the actions of she who has returned for you. Please consider this an illustration of my sincerity.”

Pandora is an emblem of hatred for Fortuna. That hasn't changed, and the moment she laid eyes on her, she assuredly could not hold back her rage.
But Fortuna had not imagined that Pandora would be such a mysterious, unfathomable opponent.

She cannot come up with any clues as to what happened. She cannot comprehend what is going on. All of the events which happened today in this forest transcended Fortuna's imaginings. The one thing she does understand is that, thanks to all of these incomprehensible happenings, everything is on the verge of ending.

Juice: “Fortuna-sama, compose yourself!”

A roar cuts into Fortuna's stunned mind just as it begins to stall.
The pain of her slapped cheeks leads her to blink, and find Juice right there, looking at her. He grasps her shoulders.

Juice: “I am sure that you have queries, and am sure that you are confused. HOWEVER, you must leave that aside for the PRESENT MOMENT. What is crucial is to safeguard this forest, safeguard EMILIA-SAMA! And... the defeat of that woman shall ACHIEVE SUCH!”

Fortuna: “—Juice.”

Strength returns to Fortuna's eyes. She glares at Pandora.

Yes. He's right. She might be strange and unknown, and the inability to anticipate what will happen next is terrifying. But even so, Pandora had eliminated powerful Regulus from this scene, and returned Juice's missing arms.
She had foolishly weakened own combat forces and rejuvenated the enemy. She might not even have realised that she has cornered herself.

Fortuna: “You're exactly right, Juice. Wondering about what's happening can happen later. Now is when!”

Juice: “We combine our strength, and DEFEAT HER! Should we repel her, the remaining cultists in the forest also WILL WITHDRAW. —We can SAVE EMILIA-SAMA!”

The image of her daughter passes through Fortuna's mind.
She had been prepared for their previous goodbye to perhaps be their last. And she had indeed been acting until now with that exact resolve. But now, she sees a new hope.

Emilia will be saved. By none other than Fortuna and Juice's power.

Fortuna: “—Frigid white, captor of time, magic palm of sheer ice.”

The magic which had stricken Regulus even now churns within Fortuna, seeking a place where it

may detonate. Her canto presents that power with form, with a target, as mana interacts with the world.

Out sounds a crack as the sharp-tipped icicle forms, the thing large enough for multiple giants to heft together, a spear of ice.
Its point aims at Pandora. Should it launch and strike her, she will be mutilated, her remains scattering everywhere and freezing beyond any hope of repair.

Beside Fortuna, Juice hugs his shoulders as pressure surges from him as well.
The power runs frenzied beneath his tattered vestments, the wounds except those on his restored arms reopening. Even in this grievous state, he will expend the whole of his soul for the sake of those he believes in.

Faced with the manifestation of their powers, Pandora does not even take fighting stance as she smiles.

Pandora: “Now, please do come. —Allow me to savour your resolve to its very limit.”

The couple's power quakes the world, all in an effort to rip apart Pandora's smile.
And,

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Emilia wakes up in the basin and shakes her head, managing to recall her location as she glances around the area.

Emilia: “Right... I...”

Herself, covered in mud, and unfamiliar scenery. Scraped knees, legs pained from excessive running.
All of it weighs down on Emilia as she regains consciousness, with the panic constricting her chest and her rejuvenated memories informing her that this is neither a lie nor a dream.

Emilia: “Mother... Juice... Arch...”

Precious people, who had all staked their own lives so that she could escape.
As she recalls their faces in sequence, Emilia remembers that she must do something. Everyone who had tried to protect her told her to run.
That they want her to run dead ahead, and escape the forest.

But, Emilia also thought this:
There has to be something she can do for everybody.

Emilia: “That's, right... the siel, the siel!”

Seal. The word lingers in her memories from before losing consciousness.
The discussion a stern-faced Fortuna had had with Arch. About how the scary people had come here searching for the seal in the forest.

The forest's seal lies deep in the deepest depths of the forest where Emilia lives, a mysterious door.

Leading to nowhere, just a metallic-looking door standing there in the middle of the woods.
The adults called the place the seal. Emilia knew its location.

Emilia: “Have to go there.”

Going there would not present Emilia with anything she could do.
She didn't know how to open the door, and she didn't even know what the word 'seal' exactly meant. But she knew something extremely important was there, and knew its location—which was more than enough for Emilia.

Considerations about what she might be able to do are not what spur her into action.
It is the hope, that going there will make things change, that pushes her forward.

Emilia: “The siel should be... but, which way was it?”

Having tearfully parted with Juice, tearfully parted with Fortuna, and ran around the forest in Arch's arms, Emilia runs directly for an unknown place, alone.
This may be the forest where Emilia lives, but it is no longer the forest that Emilia knows. The region that Emilia frolicked in was limited only to the village's surroundings. Forget about the seal's location, she could not even put her finger on where her mother or Juice would be.

Emilia: “Auh, hah...”

Emilia wails at her own powerlessness.
She knew what she needed to do, but lacked the strength to achieve it. She has no mother to cling to when troubled, here. She has to be the one to act and save her mother.

Emilia: “—Hm?”

Emilia's earnest feelings spur those watching over her into motion.
Emilia wipes away her tears, when dim lights pass by her face and lead her to blink. She looks up, to find several glowing lights cutting into her vision.

Emilia: “The, fairies?”

Emilia calls them fairies. Fortuna and Juice call these supernatural entities spirits.
Supposedly lacking any language or will, the lesser spirits answer to the young girl's frantic plea.

The lesser spirits dance in circles before the paralysed Emilia. They all move in one direction then back again, there then back again, over and over, demonstrating the course.
Emilia's voice trembles as she realises what the spirits are trying to say.

Emilia: “You're telling me, where to go?”

They don't reply. But they do bob up and down, as if in affirmation.

Emilia: “If I go that way, I'll find the siel? I'll be able to save Mother and everybody?”

The spirits strobe brightly.
Emilia wipes away her tears as she shakes her head.

This isn't the time to be bawling here forever.

Her mother and Juice and so many people had helped her, and when she started crying, even the fairies came to cheer her up. After all of this, she cannot pardon herself to cower here endlessly.

Emilia: “Mm... mm, mhm.”

The spirits bob about, as if confirming whether Emilia is well. She nods in reply, and with her small frame swaying, breaks into a run. She follows the spirits' guide, dashing desperately over the rugged earth.

She passes over hollows, scales steep inclines, passes through the gaps between trees.
At many points along the path are areas that the spirits can travel through, but Emilia cannot. She stumbles, branches scraping at her cheeks, tumbling mouth-first to the ground, which she spits out before standing back up.

Her breathing labours, tears of fear and pain welling up again.
She sniffs her snot back up, wipes her tears with her muddy sleeves, gives her grazed knees a slap and runs.

She withstands the pain and the hurt, running with all her might as the memories pass through her mind.

Memories of her time spent living in this forest, ever since she first gained cognizance.
Fortuna was a stern mother, and never spoiled Emilia in the least. She wasn't Emilia's real mother. Emilia had proper, real parents, like normal.
Such had been a common thing to hear from Fortuna, repeated over and over, which Emilia both believed and did not believe. She had real parents. That made her happy. But Fortuna was also her real mother. And as far as Emilia cared, that was unquestionable truth. It was because of today's happenings that she truly understood that.

She remembers being scolded. She remembers nights where she would hold a crying, apologetic Emilia, and sleep together with her. She knew that she would always stroke her head when she woke up until got out of bed, so that Emilia would not be lonely.
Emilia knew better than anyone that her mother loved her.

Everybody in the village had been kind to her.
There had always been a kind of alienation, where it felt like they were keeping their distance, and weren't sure how to interact with her. But even so, they never said anything that would hurt her, and always treated Fortuna well.
She knew that even with the Princess Room, everybody had done their best to make sure it would be a nice place for Emilia to spend her time. They prepared toys so that she wouldn't feel alone while inside, and made lots of hand-stitched dolls for her. The count of dolls multiplied by the day, and Emilia had long ago ran out of enough fingers and toes to even hope to play with them all.
All of those dolls, every single stitch of thread, was proof of their care toward Emilia.

Emilia had hated Juice at first.
Because everybody's distancing of her and locking her in the Princess Room always happened when Juice's group was visiting. The adults were hiding things from her so that they could do something fun. When she first escaped the Princess Room and witnessed Juice and Fortuna talking, and saw Fortuna smiling at him, Emilia was jealous of Juice.
She thought she would never forgive him. But he had broken into tears upon meeting her. Cried and cried, spilling tears of happiness, and Emilia forgave him.
After all, those were tears of warmth. She thought back on how peaceful she felt whenever Fortuna

hugged her, and patted Juice's head. She kept by his side as he cried so that he wouldn't feel alone when the tears stopped. He's hopeless, she thought.
Just hopeless. She thought.

Emilia: “I... with everybody, again...”

She wanted to sleep with Fortuna again.
She wanted to invite everybody to the Princess Room.
She wanted to take that cheeky Juice, who was trying to protect Emilia, and definitely stomp on his foot.

She wanted to see everybody again.

Emilia: “Because I'm, a good girl...”

The tears blur her vision as she runs, and after passing by a handful more trees—Emilia discovers the seal she has been seeking, and,

???: “Welcome.”

A girl with platinum hair stands before the door, her arms spread to greet Emilia.

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Girl: “Thank goodness. You were the first to arrive. I was glad to have finally found the seal, but I could not locate the essential key. I am truly relieved to have found you safely.”

Emilia: “Why are... you here?”

The girl, Pandora, addresses Emilia with familiar tone and strange pressure. Emilia's throat trembles as she asks her question, and Pandora gives a small clap of her hands.

Pandora: “Huhuhu, you must be surprised. It is all very simple. This seal is very important to me. And so I have always been searching for it. It is one of the reasons that I have come to the forest today. Which means that I need to be here.”

Pandora's response isn't what Emilia is looking for.
Emilia was trying to ask about Pandora's reason for being here, in this spot. When Emilia had last seen her, Juice had been blocking her and Regulus's path.
If she's here, then that means Juice...

Emilia: “Why are... you here?”

Perhaps having noticed how close Emilia's heart is to shattering, Pandora's eyes widen. She puts her hand to her chest as she seems to reflect on what she just said.

Pandora: “I apologize. The reply that I gave you was strange. I am not the one you are asking about, you are asking about Cardinal Betelgeux and your Mother.”

Pandora is late to understand it, but she does wind up reaching the correct answer.

If Pandora had continued being mistaken, Emilia could have ended all this without her question being answered. Even though she herself did not know what she was seeking, with all of this.

Pandora smiles tenderly.
It carries no malice or maliciousness, abounding in kindness, appearing an honest attempt to dispel Emilia's anxiety.

Pandora: “Please do not be worried. You are concerned about Cardinal Betelgeux and your Mother, both of which are safe.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Pandora: “There is no need to be so anxious, though it would have been best should you have asked so originally. Neither I nor the members of the cult have come here to harm anybody in the forest. It is as I have stated, I have visited as I have business with this seal. So being, I am not so foolish as to create any unnecessary sacrifices.”

Pandora's words are kind, and thunk one after another into Emilia's overburdened heart.
If Emilia is going to trust what she's saying, then Fortuna and Juice are safe. Perhaps whatever's happening to everyone in the forest is nothing as bad as she figured.
In fact, this girl had just said that she had business with the seal. Meaning, once she's done with that business—

Emilia: “When you're done with the siel, will you please go home...?”

Pandora says nothing.

Emilia: “Wh-when you're done with the siel, will you please leave the forest and go home? Go home without doing anything bad to everybody?”

Pandora: “—Why, of course. I have no desire for unnecessary sacrifices either.”

Pandora gives a deep nod, as if she's making a promise.
She then points at the seal, and tilts her head at the teary Emilia.

Pandora: “Which means that I would like for you to please give me the key. Provided that we may open this door, we shall withdraw from the forest immediately.”

Emilia: “Key...?”

Pandora: “Yes. A key. Considering the form of a door which this seal has taken, a key is necessary to open it. You would be in possession of that key.”

Emilia: “I, don't know anything about that...”

Emilia shakes her head.
She truly has no idea what Pandora's alluding to. She doesn't remember anyone giving her anything like a key, and the seal had been kept secret from Emilia in the first place.
There is no possible way that Emilia could own a key for a seal which she had been kept in the dark about. It doesn't even bear thinking, with how natural this conclusion is.

Emilia shakes her head.

Pandora also shakes her head.

Pandora: “There is no need for secrecy.”

Emilia: “I-I'm not keeping secrets... I really, really don't know! I don't have any key! I haven't been given a key! Me, I can't open the siel!”

Pandora: “I see. —Then, I will have to dig through the forest so that I may find the key.”

Pandora's expression looks incredibly pained. She lowers her gaze.
While her actions and tone are sympathetic toward Emilia, her ironclad mentality means that she will most likely do exactly the thing she is saying that she will. Emilia trembles.

If she cannot open the seal right here and right now, this girl will dig through the forest.
Dig through, is simple, vain decoration for it. Pandora is going to DIG THROUGH the forest, the people living in it, Fortuna and villagers, and Juice's group to get this thing.

This is an abnormal entity.
So abnormal, that Emilia is convinced that not even Fortuna would be a match for them.

Emilia: “I-I'll open it! I will open it!”

And so, Emilia calls out before Pandora can start acting.
Pandora's face brightens.

Pandora: “You truly will? Thank goodness. So the key was in your possession after all. I had thought it would be. After all, you cannot deny that you are the witch-child.”

Emilia: “A, witch's...?”

Pandora: “Indeed, yes. Now, if you would like to see to the seal? Provided that I may investigate what is inside this door, we will stand down immediately.”

Handing the scene over to Emilia, Pandora waits elatedly for her to act.
While the term she mentioned does claw at her chest, Emilia cannot retreat and so steps forward.
Little Emilia can look up, and look up even further, but still not sight the top of the door.
It's like a giant door that a giant made so that a more giant giant could pass through. The idea that tiny Emilia has to open this thing is some kind of empty, hollow fantasy.

She stands before the door. Standing is all well and good, but Emilia has no idea how to open it.
Back when she located the seal, Emilia went through all her usual ideas for how to approach the thing. She has already tried pushing it, pulling it, climbing it, far and long ago.
Emilia's tiny form had not made this ancient door move an inch, and she could not even get the thing to creak, much less open.

Today will be the same case.
She can reach out and touch it, but it gives not the slightest indication of moving.

Emilia: “Hahh... hauh, hahhh... ahh...”

Her pulse races abnormally fast, her blood churning sluggishly through her head.
Her chest flashes hot, and her thrashing heart could leap out of her mouth at any instant. But her

limbs are dead cold, heavy, as if stuffed with lead.

She has to move it but cannot.
If she does not open this thing, something terrible will happen to everybody.

And she knows this, but can't do anything.
Terror and despair bleach her thoughts stark white, crushing Emilia whole.

Pandora: “—Please consider thinking: I am a key.”

The voice is horrifically smooth as it slips into desperate Emilia's ear.

—I am a key.

As ordered, Emilia focuses on only that image.
Instantly, Emilia feels a weight in her hands. She looks at them. To find that she is grasping a large, ancient, silver key.

Emilia: “A key...”

Pandora: “It is visible to you now? If so, then you indeed are the key.”

Says Pandora happily.
But there is something unnatural about her statement. It almost seems like Pandora cannot see the key in Emilia's hands.

Emilia: “You... can't, see it?”

Pandora: “—. No, I cannot. That key will only be given to the hands of the qualified. I am certain that in this world, there are only two people capable of opening that lock.”

Pandora seems to find that position enviable. And indeed, her gaze is not fixed on the key in Emilia's hand. Although unsure what it means that she cannot see a key which is so perceptible that it has weight, Emilia turns back to the door.

A sudden key—but Emilia can't find anything that looks like a keyhole.
This door does not even have a doorknob. And although the key is big, in pales in comparison to this door. Can this grungy old key really open it?

Emilia: “—ah,”

When Emilia instinctively figures out how to use the key.
Searching for a keyhole is unnecessary. The door itself is like a keyhole.

This door is not running the seal.
It is merely acting as a cap for the seal. The door is not sealing anything. The seal is something more insubstantial, operating inside of this door.

Pandora: “Now, please open it.”

Accepting Pandora's demand, Emilia takes a step forward.
Simply pressing the key against the door, and willing for the door to open, will be enough to open

it. By that alone, this door will be freed from its long, long post.

—If she opens this door, everybody will be saved.

Pandora: “...Is there something wrong?”

But the moment before she moves to press the key to the door, Emilia's outstretched arms halt. Noticing how Emilia's fingers have stopped shaking, Pandora furrows her brows slightly.

Emilia goes without replying, instead staring at the key in her hands.
If she proceeds to press the key to the door, the seal will open.
But—

???: <Emilia. —Promise.>

Emilia hears in her mind the whispered words from her mother's goodbye.

Their conversation back then had not been about the seal.
But Emilia remembers. That she promised her mom that she would keep her promises.

She does not know about this seal. She mustn't know about this seal.
Emilia doesn't know about this place, and isn't meant to interfere with it.

She promised Fortuna. Her keeping her promise must get higher priority than anything else. She is betraying her trust, and musn't do it.
Nobody will forgive Emilia if she is a bad girl. Nobody be able to forgive her.

And so, she must not open this seal.

Emilia: “I-I, can't open it...”

Pandora: “—Why is that?”

Emilia: “The promise... because, I promised. I don't have anything to do with the siel. I'm not allowed to open it.”

Pandora: “I see. Promises are truly important things. I think it is very splendid and great that you would like to keep your promise. However... they are also things which are dependant upon timing.”

Pandora matches her gaze to Emilia's, who shakes her head. She strokes Emilia's silver hair.

Pandora: “I suspect that this promise is one between yourself and your Mother. Your Mother is a very wonderful person. She has taught you something venerable and correct. Your will is precious and deserves to be upheld.”

Emilia: “A-and, so...”

Pandora: “But, it sometimes happens that there come times where you must make a decision which will run contrary to a promise. Perhaps it is cruel that I am seeking a decision from you when you are still young. However, fate and its looming decisions will not take into consideration the circumstances of those it trifles. Fate loves those who resist in turn to its waves, and inspires hope in the outcome of the decision. Which is the hope that you seek?”

Emilia: “Which, hope?”

Pandora nods, smiling maternally.

Pandora: “Yes,”

She presents her hands to Emilia.

Pandora: “First is the hope that you will keep your promise with your mother, proceed without opening the seal, confront my party, and overcome this tribulation.”

Pandora raises her right hand, as if holding this invisible thing called hope.

Pandora: “And second is that hope that you defy the promise with your mother, open the seal, grant the wishes of my party, and the situation will settle down with no further injuries.”

Pandora raises her left hand, again showing Emilia this invisible hope.

Faced with these two hands, Emilia goes rigid.
She cannot even recognize her breathing, with how her lungs feel to have frozen. Should she say anything careless, Pandora may instantly withdraw both of her hands.
Unable to touch either of the hopes presented to her, perhaps it will end with them being taken away from right under Emilia's nose.

—The terror grasps the young girl's heart firm, not letting go in the least.

Pandora: “Which hope shall you choose? —I leave the decision to you.”

The right hope. The left hope.
The hope resultant from breaking the promise. The hope resultant from keeping the promise.

Pandora's sweet and alluring voice.
Fortuna's kind and chiding call of her name.

She cannot even hear her heartbeat under all this noise.
Sound disappears from the world, leaving Emilia behind in a land without colour.

She's thinking. Deliberating. Her thoughts are blazing, her brain could boil any moment.
She focuses every bodily function she has into thinking, giving the impression that everything from her neck down has died. She cannot hear her pulse, her limbs utterly motionless and alienated from her will.

She can't choose, she can't choose, she can't choose she can't choose she can'tchooseshecan'tchoose.

Which choice will save everybody? What should she do that will help everybody?
What can she do that will make her everybody's strength? What should she do? Somebody, tell her.

Emilia: “—ah.”

Pandora: “I see. So that is your decision.”

Her thoughts solder, her vision clouds, when Emilia slips a small sound.
Seeing her decision, Pandora's long-lashed eyes lower their gaze.

—Emilia's fingers are touching Pandora's right hand.

The path to not break the promise, not open the seal, and hope for everyone's rescue.

Emilia: “I... promised, my... mother, I'd keep... my, promises, so... mother...”

Pandora: “Until the very end, you trust in your mother's words, your compass. The answer you have reached following your indecision, and the result that your life has divined, shall I respect.”

Pandora nods in agreement as Emilia's eyes overflow with tears.
She releases her hand from Emilia's grasp. Emilia falls to her knees as Pandora looks on, gaze merciful.

If Pandora wanted, she could have just pushed Emilia's hands to the door while she held key.
While that has nothing to do with whether or not Emilia would will for the door to open, being that she had been seeking some kind of support, it may have been enough to send her over the edge.
Pandora knew that, but didn't do it.
That alone was something trustworthy about this utterly bizarre girl.

Pandora: “And so,”

Emilia: “...huh?”

Pandora: “Please respect my decision as I consider methods to open the seal.”

Emilia raises her head, stunned.
Pandora is not looking at Emilia. Her gaze is directed somewhere behind her. Emilia follows her line of sight, to find a silhouette pushing away the shrub as it soars onto the scene.
With her short silver hair,

Woman: “PANDORAAA!!”

And covered in blood, it is Fortuna.
Compared to when Emilia last saw her, she is drowning in injuries. But even so, having been convinced that they might never meet again, just knowing that she's alive is a relief for Emilia's heart.

Fortuna: “Take this!!”

Apparently having not noticed Emilia's presence, Fortuna fires off six icicles, striking Pandora without the least of mercy.
Emilia's body stiffens at the danger, when Pandora glides in to position Emilia behind her, protecting her.

Pandora: “Beginning your offensive without first observing the area is very dangerous.”

With that, an icicle spears Pandora through the chest. Her thin waist, her right arm, her right light all proceed to be impaled with icicles, with one last strike blowing off her platinum head.

Emilia shrieks as she witnesses Pandora's small frame be skewered with ice. Pandora's body staggers, slumping back to land on Emilia.
Emilia catches the decapitated body as it gushes with blood. She screams. It's all too unreal.

Fortuna: “...Emilia?”

Hearing the scream, Fortuna whispers in dumb shock as she seems to come back to her senses. Rather than accomplishment in having bested a detested foe, Fortuna's eyes waver in discord as she registers that her daughter is present at this scene.

Fortuna: “Why is Emilia...? She was meant to have escaped the...”

Pandora: “To question why is a rather terrible thing. Your daughter was worried about you, wholeheartedly hoping to help you as she ran to this site. How is it that you, her mother, can proceed without praising her intrinsic purity?”

Fortuna: “—!”

Pandora's voice calls out from directly aside Fortuna.
Fortuna's amethyst eyes shoot open from both the unexpectedness of it, and at the fact that Pandora's corpse has vanished from Emilia's arms.

Pandora: “When you look as surprised as you do, you truly do resemble each other. Parent and child indeed.”

Fortuna: “—! Emilia and I aren't blood relatives! Her adorable face is from my sister in law!”

Pandora: “I give my apologies for that.”

Fortuna's mouth twists in rage as a sword of ice forms in her raised hand. Her sweeping slash slices diagonally through Pandora's torso, spraying blood everywhere. Pandora collapses back-first and limp to the ground.

Pandora: “Which means that her foster parent is her Mother. That being, you have not erred in your methods of raising her. Your daughter has grown to be a very honest, good girl. Her true parents, your sister and brother, would surely be overjoyed.”

Fortuna: “Don't you dare talk about my brother and sister in law!!”

The fallen corpse disappears as Pandora goes over, as if this is normal, to Fortuna. Fortuna swings down her sword to bisect her, and slices off her head with the backswing.
She immediately glances behind her to kill the revived Pandora with a stab. She shoves her backwards, where she slams into a treetrunk, pinned.

Fortuna: “El Huma!!”

A blanket of frigid mist shrouds the pinned Pandora, transforming her into an ice sculpture.
A humanoid sculpture is born, sealing Pandora—already beautiful enough to be a masterwork of the gods—eternally in the forest as a belonging of nature.

Pandora: “This indiscriminate use of magic is only going to exhaust you. Would you like to take a moment to calm down, and for us to reattempt by waiting for an opportunity to talk?”

Fortuna: “—! Tedious talk!”

The ice sculpture remains, with only Pandora inside having escaped and starting walking around. Fortuna spins around to find Pandora standing there, and sloppily swings her fist to hit her. It isn't even a magical attack. Just a punch resultant from vain struggle.
It strikes Pandora in the face as if drawn straight to it.

Emilia: “—aagh,”

Fortuna: “E-Emilia!?”

Blown away by her mother's punch, Emilia fails to catch herself and goes tumbling across the ground. Having unintentionally beaten her daughter, Fortuna's face pales as she frantically rushes over to the fallen girl's side.

Fortuna: “No! Emilia, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to! That wasn't what I...”

Pandora: “This is the pain that you feel when hit. A pain equivalent to being hit has surely just run through your heart. Are you beginning to understand how heartless your actions are?”

Her hands holding an uprighted Pandora, Fortuna's throat jars as she shoves the girl away. She stands up and looks around to find Emilia standing beside the seal as ever. No traces of being hit remain upon her white cheek.

Fortuna: “You've been saying so much nonsensical junk, over and over!”

Pandora: “But this time it was different, and soothed you. Are you unable to devote some fraction of that emotion toward someone who you believe you hate? I am not telling for you to love everyone out there in the same way that you love your daughter. But, there are some who change after receiving only the slightest of care. If I could be part of that count, then I would like to proceed without repeatedly presenting you any tragedies.”

Fortuna: “Who the hell do you think you are to demand kindness from me!? Emilia's parents...”

Noticing Emilia's gaze on her, Fortuna quickly shuts her mouth.
Emilia stares fixedly at her mother's tense face. When in presence of her daughter, no matter how detested the enemy is, there are some things which should not be spoken.

Pandora: “Then here is what we shall do. Would you like to try being the one to persuade your daughter? I have confirmed that she possesses the key, but it appears that she will not open the door. Because she is keeping her promise with you.”

Fortuna says nothing.”

Pandora: “If you rescind your promise, no chains will bind her stubborn heart. I promise that, provided that I may undo the seal, we will leave this forest without doing anything further. Indeed, I promise. I will keep my promise. ...Very nice words.”

Spoken with no hint of jest, and most likely her sincere thoughts.
But there do exist statements and actions which become overwhelmingly sardonic because of their lack of ill will.

Fortuna has seen more than enough to judge Pandora's statements as so.

Fortuna looks at Emilia.
Emilia simply clasps her hands and waits for her mother to speak. Her hands look to be gripping something, which is likely because she's holding the door's key.
Emilia has wound up recognizing the key. And if Fortuna utters a single word to render the promise ineffective, she will likely open the door. Believing that doing so will save the forest.

Fortuna: “—Don't speak idiocy.”

Pandora: “Idiocy, you say?”

Fortuna: “You'll stand down? You won't do anything more? How will you doing that benefit us? With everything you've destroyed, everything you've ruined, all the things we had to protect that you crushed underfoot, with even our pride broken and distorted... what's left for us!?”

Pandora: “Things may be born from places which are barren. Do you not consider that the magnificence of life?”

Fortuna: “When it's the pillagers saying it, the words are empty and superficial!”

Fortuna roars, jabbing her finger out at Pandora.
Pandora tilts her head, not seeming to understand what Fortuna is saying.

Fortuna: “The struggle is beautiful. There's nothing more respectable than a will to live. —Stop it with this facile talk. After robbing of us the peace we staked our lives to create, stop your condescending speech. We had comfort and happiness and everything here. You're the ones who ruined it!”

Pandora: “Our opinions appear to differ.”

Fortuna: “When your positions aren't the same, the sights you see aren't the same either. With how you're always looking down at us from on high, I'm sure you see the sky as being a different height from us!”

Spits Fortuna.
Pandora looks horrifically sad, but Fortune isn't going to respond to that. She instead keeps up her caution toward Pandora as she dashes over to Emilia, who stands beside the seal.
After confirming that this is definitely her daughter, Fortuna falls to her knees and hugs the small girl.

Fortuna: “Oh, Emilia... Emilia, I'm sorry. Why are you... where's Arch?”

Emilia: “Arch... told me, to run to the white flowers... so, me, I ran...”

Hearing this, Fortuna supposes the young elf's demise.
She hugs Emilia to her chest, keeping her from seeing her tears. Just how many had perished in this forest due to the sinister cult's violence?
Indeed, this forest will never return to being what it was before.

Fortuna: “Emilia, Emilia... you did so well to keep your promise. You're amazing. You're amazing.”

Emilia: “Mother... Mother, I, I...”

Fortuna: “Emilia... you're my pride. My treasure.”

A clinging daughter, her mother hugging her.
Pandora watches on with her expression intoxicated. Her face almost looks like she is monopolising the most beautiful sight in the world, all for herself.

Pandora: “I have enjoyed seeing this beautiful familial love. Mutual affection truly is magnificent.”

Fortuna: “That's disgusting to hear when you're saying it. —The seal's staying put. I'm not handing her over to you. Get to being an icicle, and wither here.”

Pandora: “From your phrasing, would this not usually be when you advise that the other party leave?”

Fortuna: “All I want right now is to dump the shards of your frozen corpse off the Cascades.”

Voicing curses that Emilia has never heard before, Fortuna once again begins honing her magic.
Pandora purses her lips, seeming pained.
And then.

???: “I have finally—CAUGHT UP!”

His voice sounding somewhat crazed, a man soars over the trees to arrive at this spot.
He leaps over the tall arbours, his momentum that of having been thrown, arriving on the scene with his holy vestments slathered in blood. It's Juice.

Fortuna: “Juice!”

Juice: “Fortuna-sama!”

With just one call of the other's name, the two coordinate perfectly.
They stand positioned on either side of Pandora as she occupies the centre of the clearing, the two of them commencing with their assault from both ends.

Fortuna's left hand grips Emilia's wavering right hand firm.
Emilia looks up at her mother's face.
—Her expression as her gaze pierces through enemy is so beautiful she could shiver.

Fortuna: “Al Huma!!”

Juice: “Unseen Hand!!”

Fortuna casts magic of the most powerful degree, while Juice calls upon all of the witch factor's power at this final moment to utilize this occult ability.
The overwhelming powers surge forth, and—

Emilia: “—mother?”

—With UNSEEN HAND piercing her chest through, Fortuna's blood rains upon Emilia.

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Strength drains from the hand clutching Emilia's as she witnesses Fortuna's body fall limp.

Juice: “NoOW is—THE END!”

Juice makes violent touchdown as he shouts, sweeping his battered arms hard to the side. As if pulled along by that gesture, Fortuna's body dances through space along the exact same trajectory. Her limbs go limp like a doll's, and her body tumbles across the ground as if discarded. Blood shoots out from her convulsing form like a geyser, painting the grassland red in an instant.

Juice: “That did, PROVE EFFECTIVE. ...After all of this, assuredly...”

With a ragged sigh, Juice falls to his knees.
Emilia does not see how Juice yet gazes at the fallen Fortuna with caution.

She merely draws closer, gait tottering, to Fortuna as she sleeps prone.
A hole gapes open through Fortuna's back and breast, the damage so great that the innards of her ruined body are visible. The force of the bleeding dampens, leaving Emilia sitting in a puddle of blood.
She hugs her mother's pale head, somehow managing to set it on her lap. Red spots sully Fortuna's pretty silver hair, and Emilia frantically attempts to clean her by wiping the grime away with her fingers.
But Emilia's fingers are already dirty with blood, and the more she touches, the bloodier Fortuna's hair gets.

Juice: “Fortuna-sama! Do not loosen your guard, I ask that you remain vigilant! Once I verify...”

Emilia: “juice?”

Juice: “—”

With a sharp breath, Juice heaves himself up with his palm faced towards Fortuna.
Hearing him, Emilia calls his name. After a moment of looking distantly at nothing, he blinks,

Juice: “Emilia-sama?”

He looks to have only now noticed the girl sitting in the pool of blood.
His gaze lowers down, to where Emilia's lap hosts the woman's head, her limp body lying there uselessly.
His eyes, shoot open.

Juice: “...Impossible.”

His expression one of disbelief, Juice shakes his head.
Between his own plodding self, and the fallen Fortuna, there stands a platinum girl.

Pandora smiles at Juice as he looks on.

Pandora: “I am afraid that there is nothing to be done. YOUR EYES HAVE MERELY DECEIVED YOU.”

Juice: “aaaAAAHH... AAAAaAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!?”

Putting his hands to his face, Juice ruthlessly drives his nails into his skin, carving out crimson gashes.
The force is enough that his fingernails pare off, the bright blood from his gouged cheeks painting his face scarlet.

Juice: “Impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible impossi*ble!?* Wh-what, what am, what am I DOING!? What have I DONE? Why, whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy*why!?* Then for what purpose have I... what... ahh! Ahhhh!? AaaAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!”

Juice had taken a witch factor into his body, and kept the thing's discordant power restrained by force of will.
The most important support for that resilient will snaps away. Every single thing inside Juice crumbles away.

Because the powers he had gained by risking his life had destroyed the one he had risked his life to protect.
Juice suffers mental damage beyond any possible repair, screaming as he loses his sanity.

Juice: “For what purpose—did I do anything!?”

Pandora: “Everything, for love.”

Juice's eyes peel wide, froth spilling from his lips as he gazes at the sky.
Pandora's quiet voice answers the screams of his soul.

Pandora: “You have sacrificed your soul to save the person you love. This is not anything ordinary. All of your long, long time spent supporting the Witch Cult was also for the sake of that love. All of your deeds are the outcome of love. A most excellent, beacon of love.”

Juice: “Love... LOVE... *love*... love... love... **love**...!”

Pandora: “Exactly. There is no need to fear or regret anything. Everything was inevitable. It was all according to the path of fate. The road had continued its course to lead to this point. EVERYTHING, FOR LOVE.”

Juice: “For, love...”

As he deliriously mutters the words back, Juice's mind shatters to pieces.
Juice's eyes lose their colour. He is trancelike, motionless.

He mutters inaudible whisperings, endlessly, a living cadaver.
Seeing Juice's mind so utterly broken, Pandora gives a satisfied sigh.

???: “Emi, lia...”

Just as Juice's being shatters into tiny pieces, the flame of yet another life begins to dim.

Emilia: “Mother,”

Called by a voice so frail it could disappear, Emilia calls back in astonishment.
Her trembling arms reach out to draw her mother closer, to find that she had grown depressingly light. At some point, the flood of blood has stopped its flow.

Which means that her mother is okay now, right?
Emilia is not immature enough that she can think this and protect her mind. Fortuna, too weak to even move, plainly wears the face of a dead man.

Fortuna: “...I'm, sorry, brother...”

Emilia: “Mother,”

Fortuna: “I didn't... stay, by, a single thing, you... told me...”

Spoken like a child giving an apology, as Fortuna voices her regrets.
Blood no longer streams from her body, though tears pour from her eyes. Emilia feels the hot teardops land on her fingers, and scrambles to gather them up.
Because Emilia inevitably feels that these compose the entirety of her mother's current strength to live.

Fortuna: “I know, you'll... be angry, sister... I know you, won't, forgive me...”

As she listens to Fortuna mutter incoherently, Emilia finally realises.
Fortuna's amethyst eyes have not been reflecting any light for a long time.
She has long lost her sight, and they have degraded solely into organs for shedding tears. She is not even looking at Emilia's face. She has not even noticed that Emilia is right beside her.

Emilia can touch her, can hug her, but won't reach her.
Faced with Fortuna as she sobs like a child and seeks forgiveness, Emilia—

Emilia: “—I forgive you, mother.”

Fortuna says nothing.

Emilia: “You're my... you were so good to me... and not even Father, or Mother, could beat you with how you like me sooo much...”

Fortuna says nothing.

Emilia: “So you, don't have to apologize. You do not have to. Emilia will always, always love you, Mother Fortuna. Love you. Love you, love you... love you...”

The dam bursts.
Her voice loses its usual tone, as the overflowing tears drip one-by-one onto Fortuna face.

Should teardrops compose the strength to live, then the final miracle here was the strength conferred by Emilia's tears.

Emilia: “...Mother?”

Fortuna: “Lia.”

Her hand slowly reaches out, to touch Emilia's cheek.
A hand which should not be moving strokes Emilia's cheeks, her ears, tickles her hair. As if touching something beloved, so as not to break it, lovingly.

Fortuna: “You big crybaby.”

Emilia says nothing.

Fortuna: “I love you, sooo much...”

The strength drains from her.
Her arm thuds to the ground.

Emilia senses that Fortuna's body has grown lighter.
Her body has lost its strength, and this should be compounding the weight on Emilia's lap, but Fortuna as she lays in Emilia's arms has definitely grown lighter.

The most important part of her mother, which must not be shed, has been shed.
Even Emilia can understand that.

She has lost Fortuna, her mother.
Juice, Betelgeux Romanée-Conti, has lost his mind.
And Emilia,

Pandora: “Now, have you prepared yourself to choose the hope which follows the opening of the seal?”

Ask Pandora after walking over to Emilia, who holds Fortuna's corpse close.
She watches Emilia sit, all while wearing that calm expression and waiting silently for her reply.

Finally, Emilia understands.

Emilia: “Open, the siel?”

Pandora: “Yes. Although highly unfortunate, your Mother, who you shared your promise with, has passed away. There is no need for promises to bind you as fetters for any longer. What do you think?”

Listening to Pandora as she speaks insane logic, as if it's normal, Emilia comprehends.
She knows what this demon wearing human shape was thinking in pulling this stunt.

This demon did what she did so that Emilia would break her promise.
Entirely for the sake of making Emilia lose sight of a promise's significance, Pandora had caused Fortuna's death, tormented Juice's mind, and annihilated the forest.

Pandora: “Right, I forgot.”

Emilia says nothing.

Pandora: “I doubt that they will be necessary for you any more.”

Pandora reaches her hand out toward unresponsive Emilia's face. For dim lights to begin glowing,

encircling Emilia, before selecting Pandora's arm as their home and perch.

The minor spirits.
The fairies who had guided Emilia to the seal, and shown her the path.
And, why were they, going to Pandora?

Pandora: “Seeing as I doubted that you would come here on your own, I have enlisted their help. They do not communicate with words, but they have been very reliable.”

Pandora smiles as she thanks the spirits, and with that, they dance through the air.

Since when had this started? Emilia cannot even tell.

Emilia's head wavers as she looks up at the seal's door.
It feels like the door is looming, pining to someday be opened, and watching Emilia. She feels the weight of the key in her hands. She had thought that she had dropped it somewhere, but now it is again in her grasp.

Pandora: “You do have the key. Then, you know what to do.”

Pandora gives a nod. Emilia slowly stands up.
She lowers her mother's head from her lap and silently sets it atop the grass. She twines her finger through her bangs, arranging her prided mother's beautiful face nicely.
And,

Emilia: “Just die.”

—A blade of frigid wind whistles through the air, slicing Pandora's body to pieces.

Her spouting blood freezes in an instant. Flowers of frozen crimson bloom furiously.
With a single icicle standing central in their midst, out scatter the sanguine-flecked petals, a masterpiece of ice and death.

Pandora: “That was rather dangerous. Where on earth is this all coming—”

Emilia: “Just die.”

Rods of ice spear down to impale Pandora's limbs, a spear of ice shoots up from the ground to pierce Pandora from groin to crown, her frozen body screeching as it shatters into pieces.

Pandora: “Please calm down. I am sure that discussion will lead us to an understanding.”

Emilia: “Just die.”

Balls of ice close in from both sides, crushing Pandora between them and transforming her into a splatter of blood.

Pandora: “We should stop. You are kind by nature, and not a girl capable of harming others. Has your Mother never told you so?”

Emilia: “Just die.”

A spinning blade of ice slices through Pandora from the feet up, casting up a spray of red sherbert.

Pandora: “It would sadden your Mother to see you like this. Neither your legitimate Mother and Father, nor Cardinal Betelgeux, would desire this.”

Emilia: “JUST DIE!”

White mist cloaks Pandora's body, transforming her into a sculpture of ice. The giant icy sword which slams into her the moment after smashes rather than slices her with its force, beating the Pandora sculpture to the earth.

But despite this storm of destruction and bloodlust,

Pandora: “This is something of a predicament. It appears that the effects were the opposite of what I had intended.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die, just die, just die!!”

Bawling, swinging her arms, Emilia rains icy destruction upon Pandora.
But even as they all strike her, and she dies gruesome death, she continuously comes back fully restored after only the space of a blink.

Emilia: “Hahhh! Hahhh! Hauhhh!”

Emilia is approaching her limit for using this excess of magic.
With her repeated casts of magic unfitting to her, red-faced Emilia's lower body begins to freeze.
The vast mana swallowed inside her young body is running rampant, and failing to escape outside in time.

Pandora: “The manifestation of power surpassing your capacities, such that you cannot even avoid damages to your own body, would be because of your bloodline. The blood of a witch cannot escape that karma. —Perhaps this forest had been necessary so that you would not awaken to this power.”

Emilia shakes her head in refutation of the noise. Her right led is entirely frozen, and it's questionable whether she can even stand. She falls to her knees, her eyes brimming with bloodlust as she glares at Pandora.

Seeing that pointed, ominous gleam, Pandora shakes her head.

Pandora: “This is unfortunate when I am standing before my dearest goal, but I believe that I will withdraw for the day. It does not seem that you will be willing to listen to anything more about kindly opening the door.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die just die just die, just die...”

Pandora: “I will regard this day as well enough finished with only the presence of your lineage, and the creation of a new Cardinal of Sin. I will achieve my goal at another time."

Egocentric logic, disregarding of other and entirely self-centered.
Pandora appears to have washed her hands of the situation, when white flakes flit through her vision.

Snow.

Emilia's outrageous magical powers are running amok, warping weather to the extremes and making it snow.
At first it merely spinkles down, but the snow progressively builds in force and strength, soon coming cloaked with wind ferocious enough to call the whole thing a blizzard.

Pandora: “It appears that, whenever we next speak, I will have to begin by having you expel everything before we may even face each other.”

Pandora looks down from the sky as she walks over toward Emilia, who breathes white puffs. Although she witnesses a hated enemy approaching, Emilia cannot move. Her body has already frozen up to her waist, and she cannot even raise her arms any more.

Pandora: “You have caused this frenzy of power, and will proceed to fall into a long slumber. Will the mana of this glaciated forest be fully exhausted, or will an entity possessing power comparable to your own counteract it? Whichever it may be, I suspect that you will spend more than a short period beneath the ice.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die!”

Pandora: “I regret to tell you that I will not die. I suspect that both you and I will still remain healthy by the time that the ice melts and we again meet. And certainly, once that time comes, we cannot have things proceed in the vein that they currently are. And so.”

Pandora's white finger touches cold against Emilia's forehead.
Emilia's amethyst eyes seethe with loathing. Pandora smiles without any malice.

Pandora: “ALL OF YOUR MEMORIES LEADING TO THIS DAY ARE CONSUMMATED WITHOUT MY PRESENCE IN THEM.”

Emilia: “—Ah,”

Pandora: “Feel free to supplement them however you wish. Indeed. You did your very best to keep your promise. It would make me glad if that fact could be engraved in your heart, and you could proceed to be as you presently are.”

With her body frozen up to her breastbone, Emilia's face recoils, her gaze unfocused and puttering. Her eyes spin and drool trails from her mouth as Emilia's mind is ransacked.

It crumbles.
Indiscriminately and unfeelingly, the wallpaper of her memories is replaced.
The conversations she had fade into the distance, while insults she surely did not receive assault her.

Important, unfading—a promise.
She kept her promise, and that alone was something that she would never forget. And she would never forget to keep her promises, either.

She kept her promise. The promise was kept.
Nobody had any reason to invalidate her for keeping her promise.

Pandora: “What conclusions shall your heart reach, and what smile will you give me when next we meet? I will be eagerly awaiting our wonderful reunion.”

The blizzard rages through the forest. Pandora holds her long, dishevelled hair down as she starts walking.
Having remained on his knees in a stupor, Juice is halfway buried in the snow. Pandora whispers something to him. He stands up, expression powerless.

The two of them, Pandora and Juice, walk side by side as they leave the snowy forest.

Emilia can only watch them go.
The freeze has already reached her face, and her awareness remains only in her eyes.

Emilia lowers her gaze, and notices it.

On the ground before her, there is an unnatural lumping of snow.
As if, in the middle of this white snowscape, somebody is hugging her.

Emilia: “—”

Her mouth doesn't move. She cannot even close her eyes any more.
Her body is frozen, and her heart is freezing. Emilia's consciousness—

Emilia: “—ther,”

—then came to spend a century encased in the unmelting ice.

Until a spirit found her, a spirit who was searching for her, a spirit given life in this world entirely for the sake of her.

—Until that time, Emilia remained frozen in the ice.

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Having witnessed it all, and faced with the sight of her own frozen self, Emilia stands stock still.

She remembers everything that happened.
These scenes of the past, slowly unfolding ever since she had woken up.

All of them have been peeled of their superficial, false skin, and come flowing out.
Young Emilia had seen everything that day. She saw how Fortuna died in her arms, how Juice's mind broke and went insane, and witnessed the perpetrator of all this evil.

And she forgot them, because of her own weakness and desire to forget them?

Echidna: “It would be a mistake to fault yourself for the falsification of your memories.”

The girl standing beside Emilia, Echidna, addresses her.
Just as Emilia had experienced her memories vicariously, Echidna had witnessed everything that happened from start to finish.

She glances at Emilia, who gazes at the snow.

Echidna: “That *thing* you confronted was the WITCH OF VAINGLORY Pandora. She brandishes superficial and self-serving logic, REWRITING events however her whims and pleasures dictate. The dampening of her influence would be a result of time's passage, and your very own strength.”

Emilia: “My, strength...”

Echidna: “As you can see, your strength is so immense that you can't fully control it. If we are speaking entirely in terms of combat, you surpassed Pandora even here, when you were young. But battles aren't so shallow that you can prevail on strength alone. And especially not when Pandora is a witch with a penchant for surviving.”

It isn't clear how far her knowledge spans, but it appears that Echidna knows about Pandora.
Although, her expression as she speaks with Emilia is as bitter as ever, and she doubts that she will get an honest answer if she asks her any questions.

Emilia: “...You're not insulting me like you were before?”

Echidna: “That's the kind of thing about you that I hate. Of course I'm thoughtful enough to be considerate toward someone who just remembered the death of their mother. Even if that someone is a filthy licentious whore.”

Emilia: “Thank you.”

Echidna gives a sigh, speaking no further comforts.
Noticing that she's coming close to smiling at Echidna's attitude, Emilia realises that she has been attempting to divert her attention from the grisly memory before her in a show of weakness.

These resurrected memories are utterly things which shake Emilia's perspective of the world.
Things which overturn Emilia's life from its very outset.

After all, Emilia was going to save everyone in the forest—and so was her reasoning for devoting herself to the Royal selection, but,

Emilia: “I wonder if anyone's still alive... in this frozen forest.”

Emilia had witnessed both Fortuna and Arch's deaths.
The BLACKSNAKE's attack was information which had been absent in Emilia's memory. She knew the beast's might, and the wicked characteristic it possessed.

The Witchbeast of Blight the BLACKSNAKE infects living creates with a hundred diseases just by contact alone. And it places curses on the land it travels, transforming the region into a locality of death where only witchbeasts can live.

—How many people had survived before the village was buried in snow?
And were those who survived and now encased in ice uninfected by the Snake's pestilence?

This was equivalent to Emilia losing her very reason to fight.

Indeed, she can agree with these memories being sealed.
Even had Pandora not interfered, perhaps Emilia would have wanted to forget about these events.

That is how utterly hopeless these memories are.

Echidna: “...Standing here indefinitely won't end TRIAL.”

Echidna gazes at the silent world of snow.

Echidna: “The past went along without any issues. Challenger of the TRIAL as you are, you must have recognized your greatest regret. Now you need to present an answer.”

Emilia: “Present an answer for the TRIAL?”

Echidna: “The first TRIAL is beaten by demarcating an end to the symbol of your regret. Do you affirm the actions of your past self, or reject them? If you are unable to fully accept this and reject the question, this will all end without the TRIAL being accomplished.”

Emilia gives a deep sigh.
She has thought over and over about what she needs to overcome the TRIAL.

When faced with counterfeit memories, she had questioned herself as to why she was unable to overcome them.
Losing Puck, and having to take over the parts of herself that she had entrusted to him, was what first let the cap on Emilia's memories come loose.

Now, Emilia finally stands at the starting point for the TRIAL.
But even though her legs have reached the starting line, she has lost sight of the starting line in her own heart.

She left the forest because she wanted to save everybody, save her mother.
It's turned out that those ideas weren't even idealistic ones, they were straight-out fantasies.

Her mother is dead, and she doesn't know if the villagers are safe.
If she loses the reason that she set out on this path, what remains for Emilia?

Emilia: “—That's already been taught to me.”

Just when it seems that her heart is beginning to waver, a hand reaches out from the light and stops her.
A powerful arm, to pull Emilia forward when she is lost as to her destination.

Don't give up. Look forward, raise your head, watch me.

Over and over, again and again, he had said that to her.

He knew that Emilia was weak, but roared at her not to stay weak.
When Emilia shook her head and insisted everything was over, he said that nothing was damn over and pulled her back up.

When Emilia wanted to give up, thinking that she was useless, he had baselessly asserted that she was the best.

The pain from their teeth striking each other, and the warmth of their overlaid lips, lights a flame in

Emilia's heart.

Emilia: “Mother loved me.”

Echidna: “—”

Emilia: “I wanted to help Mother Fortuna. I wanted her to hug me again as we slept in the same bed. I wanted to tell her, countless times, that I love her.”

Echidna: “Then do you regret it?”

Echidna is asking about the moment of Emilia's decision, with the two hopes.
Back then, if Emilia had taken Pandora's hand and broken the promise, perhaps Pandora's group would have withdrawn from the forest, and Fortuna and Juice would not have been stolen.

IF, HAD I, SUPPOSING. Using those words to look back on the past, perhaps this would indeed be the case.

Emilia: “I don't regret anything.”

Echidna says nothing.

Emilia: “I don't regret that I kept my promise, and stayed my ground back then. If there's anything I regret, it's that I wasn't strong enough, and couldn't consider things more wisely. I'll never regret that I stayed true to my Mother's teachings and didn't listen to Pandora, ever.”

After all, hadn't Fortuna told her?
That she was proud of Emilia, who had determined to keep her promise, and that she was her treasure?

Those very words were a treasure, to remain inside Emilia forever.

Echidna: “Your fight hasn't lost its meaning?”

Emilia: “Nope. I... couldn't save mother. But I still don't know about everybody in the village. Everybody might be waiting there, waiting for rescue under the snow. I'm the only one who can save them.”

Echidna: “That land's been polluted by the Blacksnake. Even assuming that there are villagers alive under the frost, I doubt that they will survive long while harbouring infection.”

Emilia: “That's just how you're imagining it'll go. A nasty kind of speculation. Everybody's waiting for rescue under the snow. I'm gonna get them out of there quickly, and have them all tell me off. And then laugh, glad that they're alive.”

Echidna: “Imbecilic delusion.”

Emilia: “No, it's a forecast for a happy future!”

Emilia steps forward.
She faces Echidna and she gestures to the snowscape.

Emilia: “I won't let you invalidate something that no one's even seen yet! I'm not going to accept that the things my Mother left for me ended so sadly! I'm going to realise my Mother's ideals!”

Echidna: “Ideals? Your mother was searching for something?”

Emilia: “She said so. That one day everyone would leave the forest, and be able to live like normal. Just like how Juice's group and all the villagers could get along, and how Subaru told me he likes me, one day that world will arrive which my Mother and Juice were supposed to walk together!”

Echidna: “And the frozen villagers will be included in that world? After you trapped them in the ice?”

Emilia: “I feel sooo sorry about that. I'll apologize over and over, and over and over until they forgive me! And once they forgive me, I'll show them the world. Tell them that they don't have to live in secret any more. That this is the world that Mother Fortuna was talking about!”

Echidna: “—”

Taking a deep breath, Emilia shouts.
They are no longer in the snow, but a world of white light.

Heedless to the absence of the prickling chill, and to the departure of the scene composed of her regrets, Emilia raises her voice.

Emilia: “I'll shout myself hoarse as I holler my dreams, so that my Mother in the sky can hear it!”

Echidna: “—”

Emilia: “I am happy in the world that my Mother loved!”

The world fractures.

Seeing the fissures run through the white space, Emilia finally notices the change in setting. Her eyes widen in surprise, and Echidna strikes her hands.
Together, in applause.

Echidna: “I see, understood. I didn't expect that I'd know what would happen, but this exceeds anything I imagined. This pushy, complacent, hubristic, egotistic, hypocritical and forced purchase.”

Emilia: “Exactly. Anything wrong with it?”

Echidna: “No, I don't really care. But this is one of those points where you're exactly like your mother.”

Echidna scrunches her pretty brows, when Emilia asks her question.
Because it sounds like,

Emilia: “My, mother... you don't mean Mother Fortuna, you know about my other mother?”

Echidna: “I know her. She's part of why I get so emotional when dealing with you. Though there is still some kind of irrational resentment to it, as I lament: why does it always only happen with

you?”

Echidna gives a shrug, her form beginning to fade.
Emilia feels a vague kind of weight press down on her consciousness, a floating feeling like waking up from a dream circling around her.

Echidna: “Here's the end. No matter how complacent the logic is, a settlement with your past is a settlement with your past. All you have to do is dance clumsily around as you take your mother's resolve to sacrifice herself and use it as your rationalization.”

Emilia: “You can say anything you want. Me, I've gotten used to your insults.”

Hand to her hip, Emilia shows off her composure to Echidna, who doesn't forget to give one last jab. Echidna averts her gaze.

Echidna: “There's still two TRIALS left, but... frustratingly, I doubt they'll prove much of an obstacle.”

Emilia: “They won't?”

Echidna: “Constant rationalizations are the nemesis of self-inquisition. The overview of these TRIALS, which intrude on your interior, have terrible comparability with the present you. You could call it a boon resulting from your utter neglect to think.”

Emilia: “When you talk in a way that sounds like I'm not thinking, it actually strings sooo much.”

Emilia bares her displeasure.
That said, their conversation here is close to meeting its end.

Echidna is practically gone from view, and Emilia's head is beginning to fog. She cannot keep herself conscious any longer.

Echidna: “—I hate you.”

Emilia: “But I don't really hate you.”

What expression did Echidna make in this moment? Even though Emilia doesn't see it, she gets the sense that she knows.

Her consciousness, ascends.

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Emilia regains her conscious and groans, a hardness at her back.

Behind her is a wall. It seems that she has collapsed against it, and fallen unconscious with the thing still supporting her.
She reaches out to touch the wall and checks the writing rudely engraved there. She runs straight into an I LOVE YOU, and winds up smiling at the perfect timing.

Right now, Emilia wanted his words more than anyone else's to be the ones validating her.

Emilia: “—I'm sorry, Mother.”

Her smile twists, as her voice slips, choked, out of her mouth.
Her apology echoes through the dark room, as does the noise of her sniffling.

Teardrops stream one after another, unstoppable. Unendurable.
She had chosen to act strong, to be stubborn, and not let the witch see her cry. Inside this tomb, where there are no worries of any onlookers, Emilia presses her face against the wall and cries magnificently.

Emilia: “Mother... mother...”

The tears overflow.
They're truly from forever ago. Tears that she needed to cry one hundred years ago.

She had forgotten about it, and so had never been able to mourn her mother's death. In this small chamber where no one will know about, Emilia proceeds to mourn exactly that.

So that once she exits, no one will know what her face looks like in tears.
So that she could end this, without the boy who told her weak self that he loved her seeing her being weak.

She cries, and cries, and cries, and cries.
All while mourning the memories of her mother, her mother's affection, and everything she had given her.

Emilia remains exactly like this, proceeding to cry with her face pressed to LOVE.